**Leadership Ethics: Towards a moral framework for facilitating cooperation**

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**Abstract**

Leadership is a function in social systems and aims to reduce (social) complexity and contingency. Hierarchy as the predominant leadership model is seen gradually superseded by more egalitarian approaches, due to the fact that in nowadays organizations the full potential of humans is needed, while cascading instructions top-down is not anymore sufficiently functional in many cases.

The associated power shift leads to new tasks for leadership, as well as for those taking over leadership roles, which are reflected by facilitating and maintaining cooperation, where cooperation is a deliberate act of “free” individuals.

We will argue for two forms of cooperation a weak form (compliance) and a strong form (considering the interests of all). The theory of cooperation is being discussed from an ethical point of view, based on the moral philosophy by Morton Deutsch and James Tufts. Major implications on the principles and practices of leadership will be shown. Ultimately suggestions for the implementation of a corresponding leadership ethics are given. The findings are important for building sustainable work units on an ethical foundation.

1. Introduction

Leadership has been studied for a long time predominantly from a perspective of the dyad, operating with the designated difference between the leader and the follower or the leader as the powerholder, the subordinate or follower as the «receiver» of influence or governance (Ko et al. 2018). «Traditional leadership theory is oriented toward dyadic processes that occur at low levels of the organization (…) most researchers still define leadership as a micro-organizational phenomenon occurring between a leader and a follower, while ignoring multiple stakeholders and competing demands on leaders”. (Gordon and Yukl, 2004, p. 361). Another study comes to the conclusion that “leadership and ethics research (is) too CEO-centric and focused on the top hierarchies;” and, “it is centered more on declarations than on results or on ideas rather than on real implementations”» (Bachmann, 2017, p. 61).

More recently, the understanding of leadership has been expanding and opening for multiple models of leadership (see Chemers, 2000 for a historical review).

Nowadays people should *voluntarily* do what is being demanded and what is generally considered necessary for being successful in the work process and not because a leader or manager is giving instructions or orders as once suggested by Taylor’s idea of separating head and hand (Taylor, 2012). More entrepreneurship is asked for, more self-leadership is expected, more governance is taking place, which has its source either in the individual or in the group.

A shift from traditional hierarchical leadership models towards more autonomy of individuals and groups is obvious in practice (Zirkler, M., Power Shift: Transitions from Hierarchy to Holacracy, oral conference contribution). Where previously hierarchy (ranked order) was seen as the mechanism to reduce complexity and to give orientation, now lateral leadership and networks of leadership impulses are more and more enfolding. However, the drifts towards a multiplicity in leadership forces is occurring *although* the hierarchy is still operating, at least on a formal and official level. This results in a variety of leadership models which are operating in a social system at the same time. We propose that the sources as well as the quality of processes leading to order and orientation within a social system become more diverse.

The less power and dominance are forcing people to action, the less hierarchy is the only option of aligning, the more «real» cooperation as a deliberate and voluntary act is becoming necessary.

Cooperation comes in two versions, it reveals a «weak» form (obedience, followership) and a «strong» form (equity, partnership, egalitarian mutuality). Although the two represent rather two ends on a continuum and many mixed forms will be found in between, we will only discuss the extremes for reasons of simplification. We will present findings on the drifts in the concepts and practices of leadership, discuss the theory of cooperation and will present an understanding of an ethics of leadership as facilitating and maintaining cooperation.

This will be done in the context of labor and work as well as against the background of work related productivity.

1. Drifts in the concepts and practices of leadership

2.1. What is leadership?

Leadership is basically and first of all a *function* in a social system. Human’s basic social orientation assumed, it’s one of the forces to counterbalance a social entropy, the “natural” tendency of social systems to fall apart. (Aya, 1978; Deutsch, 2011, S. 253; Elias, 2000). The main objective of this function is to reduce complexity which origins from human’s contingency, i.e. people usually have options to decide differently and to do different things. This way, leadership provides orientation, limits potential actions and focusses toward intentional plans, thus alignment is established. These may be plans of individuals who need others to implement them or collective plans that are developed and pursued jointly. When leadership takes place psychological and social influence is used to execute a limitation and set focus towards something which is desired at a given moment: «Leadership today is seen as an *extraordinary* influence that is found in a person or group» (Praszkier, 2018, p. 10).

On the basis of a basic model of “distributing influence”, leadership research has been looking for the characteristics of a) the leader, b) the follower and c) the process which explains the relationship, particularly distribution of influence and d) the outcome of different forms or leadership for a) and b) as well as performance indicators such as productivity, quality, but also innovation etc. Another stream of research has been dealing with a variety of ideas, concepts, theories, practices etc. on how leadership is being or could be done.

One of the well-known forms of leadership comes as «hierarchy» (ranked order, literally from Ancient Greek: authority of the priests). Rank has been attached to individuals and symbolized for the sake of “usability”, e.g. as the chief, the boss, the king etc. However, rank is only working if most if not all actors in a system accept the principle of rank. Its basis is rooted in the «rule of force», which means the stronger, the one who has more resources, will prevail at the end. The strongest could just take what he wants (Tufts, 1918, p. 29), however we will show that it would be shortsighted to act in this manner, at least under conditions that require the solution of complex tasks, as is often the case today.

Extreme forms of hierarchy would be either Autocracy, where just one person holds the ultimate power or Oligarchy, where a group of people are acting as they want.

Ironically though, these individuals, necessarily need to be replaceable if the *principle* should survive. It’s not crucial if Smith or Muller holding the position of a leader, although the person is not completely neglectable due to his personal capacities etc., which will have an impact on the way this person is acting in the leadership role (which is, by the way, itself subject to contingency).

The framework of hierarchical leadership sets a ranked order where the power is situated in the respective person (leader), who gets a “mandate” and obtains the right to use power. Leadership is seen as exercising the leader’s will (which is itself often a representation of an “idea” or an organization’s will or ends) upon «followers» using power as the main means. The leader’s function is to command people do to what he wants them to do, or based on the leader’s understanding of what ought to be done. The leader’s job has been to align people towards a common goal.

In the light of anthropology and the history, hierarchy seems to be the «natural» way, the way human systems are most used to and the way, which is most elaborate of organizing a social system and structuring leadership. Without going into the related historical, anthropological and sociological discussion, we see many other forms of doing leadership in recent times. Some authors call those «post-heroic» forms of leadership (Sobral and Furtado, 2019).

Heterarchy is the umbrella term for such other forms of leadership (which then might be better called governance). Heterachical systems are network systems with (more or less) equally distributed power or «voice»: “The addition of the term heterarchy to the vocabulary of power relations reminds us that forms of order exist that are not exclusively hierarchical and that interactive elements in complex systems need not be permanently ranked relative to one another. In fact, it may be in attempts to maintain a permanent ranking that flexibility and adaptive fitness is lost” (Crumley, 1995, p. 3).

One line of arguments sees hierarchy reasonably working if the conditions in the environment of a social system are not changing too fast. According to Ashby’s law of requisite variety the complexity of a (social) system needs to be sufficiently high to manage external (environmental) complexity (Boisot and Mckelvey, 2011). Hierarchy is not working properly any more when processes need to be accelerated or if more knowledge is required than the top down approach can provide. However, the other reason for a crisis of hierarchy is rooted in the change of society towards a «society of singularities» (Reckwitz, 2019). The emphasis of individuality leads to a pressure “using” individuality, just following and subordination is less and less an option.

This drift goes hand in hand with what Peter Drucker called the «next society» (Drucker, 2012), which is a knowledge society. Digitalization (Neufeind et al. 2018; Schwab, 2019) and its social consequences have accelerated the process of multiplying options (Gross, 2002; Rosa, 2014) for solving work related challenges. Hence new concepts of leadership have been developed by researchers.

2.2. Expansion of leadership perspectives

Laloux’s book «reinventing organizations» (Laloux, 2014) was a milestone from a management practice’ point of view. The book displays evolutionary steps of organization development towards a «teal organization». One main feature would be «self-management» (Laloux, 2014, p. 61 ff.): «Teal Organizations have found the key to operate effectively, even at large scale, with a system based on peer relationships, without the need for either hierarchy or consensus» (Laloux, 2014, p. 56).

A growing body of research and literature has evolved focusing on leadership concepts and theories transcending hierarchical models (cf. Praszkier, 2018 for an overview), such as «shared leadership» (Hoch, 2013; Hoch and Kozlowski, 2014), «distributed leadership» (Spillane, 2010), «servant leadership» (Greenleaf, 2002), relational leadership» (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Related issues have been discussed, such as «Holacracy» (Bauer et al. 2019; Robertson, 2016). (Heifetz, 1994). Holocracy sees leadership as «mobilizing people to tackle tough problems» (Heifetz, 1994, p. 15). Holocracy (holos = whole, kratein = to govern) literally means that everybody is included in decision making. It is a shared decision making process, where the leader mobilizes the whole group.

However, the situation is more confusing, at least in practice (Zirkler, 2019). Despite the fact, that still much hierarchical leadership is formally seen in organizations, leadership functions are more and more distributed among multiple actors in the social system (Zirkler et al. 2020; Zirkler, M., & Herzog, J., Inclusive Leadership: Die Gestaltung von Zusammengehörigkeit als zentrale Herausforderung in der digitalen Arbeitswelt, article submitted for publication). Currently we find more patchwork than pure leadership philosophies or styles within a given system.

This conceded, the situation is paradoxical in many cases: while formal and hierarchical leadership is still prevailing and operating officially, many other forms of leadership are present. They are often working inofficially in a given social system *at the same time*. Sometimes this leads to confusion and problems or even tensions and conflicts, sometimes these different forms of leadership are coexisting peacefully side by side, but just few organizations have explicitly integrated different forms of leadership (Kotter, 2012, 2014).

(Heifetz, 1994) sees an evolution of leadership concepts in business and the corporate world: «For decades, the term leadership referred to the people who hold the top management positions and the functions they serve. In our common usage, it still does. Recently, however, business people have drawn a distinction between leadership and management, and exercising leadership has also come to mean providing a vision and influencing others to realize it *through noncoercive means*» (Heifetz, 1994, p. 15, our emphasize).

Leadership is not just the place where interests and wants are being negotiated and managed, leadership nowadays also means stimulating and maintaining «possibilities» and potentials, in the sense of aspirations, ambitions, dreams, purpose etc. People’s talents, capacities and inspirations are waiting to be harnessed for the benefit of their self-fulfilling as well as for the benevolence of the community they belong to (Zirkler, M., & Herzog, J., Inclusive Leadership: Die Gestaltung von Zusammengehörigkeit als zentrale Herausforderung in der digitalen Arbeitswelt, article submitted for publication).

One particular aspect needs to be addressed when discussing expanded forms of leadership, i.e. responsibility and accountability. The leader is an agent, who is adopting and carrying a specific form of responsibility. Hence, the role of leadership includes «care taking» in the sense of vitalizing, transferring energy to persons or processes. Therefore, leadership is strongly connected with emotions. At the same time, he will often be made (legally) accountable. Unlike in earlier times where blind obedience was socially and legally acceptable or even a virtue, nowadays everyone in an organization could be held accountable for their actions or failures. Since the leader could be hold accountable for what he is doing and neglecting a, it is in his own interest to tact responsibly.

It’s still questionable how the acquisition of a person’s responsibility and caretaking can be distributed or shared in a group. Accountability can more easily attached to different roles, but a perceived responsibility is not transferable easily. Responsibility has an intrinsic and an extrinsic aspect. Intrinsic responsibility, in the sense of “ethical caring” (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019) is a very personal thing, whereas extrinsic caretaking could be more easily attached to job descriptions and task lists.

2.3. leadership and ethics

Leadership and ethics have become of major interest in the recent years (Brown et al. 2005; Brown and Treviño, 2006; Ahmad et al. 2017; Pietersen, 2018). The research field started «from a research context looking at individual traits and virtues before becoming integrated into steward, authentic, and transformational leadership research. Later studies turned to looking at social context and collective leadership behaviour. The most recent focus is on how ethical leadership can change the organisational culture, or how it can be utilised for OD interventions» (Bachmann, 2017, p. 42).

A well accepted definition of ethical leadership was given by (Brown et al. 2005): “We define ethical leadership here as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making.” (Brown et al. 2005, p. 120).

We see a clear distinction between “ethical leadership” and “moral leadership”. Where the former refers to ethically reflected leadership against the background of ethics (moral philosophy), the latter means values and norms for good leadership.

A recent empirical study (Bachmann, 2017) comes to the conclusion that «In the broadest sense, the absence of unethical behaviour can already be seen as bearing positive leadership characteristics (…)» (Bachmann, 2017, p. 141).

(Wart, 2014) presents a compilation of «types of ethical leadership» and assigned concepts, concerns and emphasis. However, he argues that the six major leadership perspectives he could identify are expressions of three classical approaches: the virtue approach, the deontological approach and the teleological approach.

«The view that leadership should be based on values and ethics blossomed in Burns’ (1978) [(Burns, 1978)] seminal book, *Leadership*, which is recognized by many as pivotal in the perceptual shift from leadership as vested in an individual to leadership as a process. Understanding leadership as Burns proposed called for transforming relationships among followers and leaders that would result in achieving greater purpose and developing followers into being leaders themselves» (Komives, 2016, p. 7).

The consequences for leadership ethics are a related shift from virtue ethics of the leader to an ethics of cooperation. We argue that leader’s virtues are still important and have meaning, notably at the limits of compliance (Bachmann, 2017, p. 29 ff.). Where compliance ends, virtues of the leader are coming into place. Since leadership is expanding into networks and relations, virtues of the leader are still of relevance, though an ethical framework for cooperating in a system of changing leadership functions is also required. Hierarchy as a means to reduce complexity and create (social) order could be then seen as one extreme form and special case of distributed leadership, where the distribution is extremely concentrated at one place, i.e. the leader.

In the following sections we will introduce into the theory and practice of cooperation and will elaborate an ethics of leadership as a «service» (function) for the social system: making sure that the interests of all are sufficiently considered (Rescher, 1989a).

1. Theory and concepts of cooperation

For cooperation within a social system coordination will be required. The elements of the system must be related to each other in a target-oriented manner. Thus, cooperation requires leadership.

Cooperation as co-operation (lat. operari = to work; lat. opus = work) is fundamentally linked to relations. Cooperation requires at least two units or systems, which are distinguishable, operating according to their respective structure and processes (their respective auto-logic), and are related to each other in some way by the same time. Focusing on human or social systems in the following considerations, cooperation indicates a specific *quality of relations* between human beings. This is in contrast to mechanical systems, which can be related purely structurally: «In a two-party relationship, while trust and cooperation can be broken down because of the actions of either party, they can be created or maintained only by the actions of *both* parties» (Bunker & Deutsch, 1995, p. 254). Cooperation points towards surplus values (emergence of values, 1+1 equals more than 2, non-zero sum games), whereas its opposite refers to zero sum games (the gain of one is the loss of the other). And we propose that the actors are basically free to make decisions and behave differently in any given case.

On the basis of Martin Buber’s ideas on dialog, Rothenberg favors a concept where the partners can exist side by side: “In the «I-Thou» relationship, the «I» and «Thou» remain intact and are not swallowed up in a dialectical process that must and in «I *or* Thou», that is, in a new entity that nullifies the previous one. » (Rothenberg, 2015, p. 9).

Morton Deutsch’s «theory of cooperation and competition», an early developed psychological theory on social interdependence (Bunker and Deutsch, 1995; Deutsch, 1985, 2011; Johnson and Johnson, 2011; Tjosvold and Johnson, 2000) and since its inception constantly expanded, is built on a fundamental distinction of positive and negative joining goal attainment :«I identify two basic types of goal interdependence: positive (where the goals are linked in such a way that the amount or probability of a person’s goal attainment is positively correlated with the amount or probability of another obtaining his goal) and negative (where the goals are linked in such a way that the amount or probability of goal attainment is negatively correlated with the amount or probability of the other’s goal attainment). To put it colloquially, if you’re positively linked with another, then you sink or swim together; with negative linkage, if the other sinks, you swim, and if the other swims, you sink» (Deutsch, 2011, p. 24).

Group members can believe that their goals are cooperatively or competitively related or unrelated (Deutsch, 1949, 1962; Johnson and Johnson, 1989):

I. In cooperation, individuals' goal achievements are positively correlated; individuals perceive that they can reach their goals if and only if the others in the group also reach their goals. Thus, individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to all those with whom they are cooperatively linked.

2. In competition, individuals work against each other to achieve a goal that only one or a few can attain. Individuals' goal achievements are negatively correlated; each individual perceives that when one person achieves his or her goal, all others with whom he or she is competitively linked fail to achieve their goals. Thus, individuals seek an outcome that is personally beneficial but detrimental to all others in the situation.

3. In independence, there is no correlation among participants' goal attainments. Each individual perceives that he or she can reach his or her goal regardless of whether other individuals attain or do not attain their goals. Thus, individuals seek an outcome that is personally beneficial without concern for the outcomes of others. Of course, most situations are mixes of these pure forms. (Tjosvold and Johnson, 2000, pp. 133–134).

Interdependence leads to three psychological processes: substitutability, attitude (cathexis) and inducibility (Johnson and Johnson, 2011, p. 42). Substitutability means the extent to which actions of one individual can be substituted for actions of another one. Deutsch’s definition goes as follows: «how a person’s actions can satisfy another person’s intentions» (Deutsch, 2011, p. 25), e.g. building a house will need the support of many people with specific expertise, without cooperation one might only build, if at all, a simple hut.

Attitude (cathexis) is defined by a natural tendency to react positively or negatively, respectively on stimuli given by the environment:

«This inborn tendency to act positively toward the beneficial and negatively toward the harmful is the foundation on which the human potentials for cooperation and love as well as for competition and hate develop. The basic psychological orientation of cooperation implies the positive attitude that “we are for each other,” “we benefit one another”; competition, by contrast, implies the negative attitude that “we are against one another,” and in its extreme form, “you are out to harm me.” (Deutsch, 2011, p. 25).

Inducibility refers to the capacity to influence and being influenced by others. Deutsch talks about the «readiness to accept» influence from others. (Deutsch, 2011, p. 25). In a cooperative setting, it is assumed that i individuals will be able to manage mutual influence by persuasion (argument) rather than by force. Openness should mitigate communication problems and create an atmosphere of positive attitude among the actors.

Bateson’s concept of «schismogenesis» (G. Bateson, 1936) fits Deutsch’s ideas on the dynamics of cooperation and competition. Bateson postulates two forms of schismogenesis, symmetrical and non-symmetrical relationships. A symmetrical schismogenesis is a pattern of behavior which can be called competitive. Competition comes in the form of armament. While reacting on an opponent’s move, one escalates the rivalry further. The more A is doing the more B is doing, which causes A to do even more. Complementary schismogenesis is indicated by a behavioral pattern where one part is showing dominance, the other submission. The more A is getting assertive, the more B will become submissive. If B has the role of the leader, submissiveness of the leader has unwanted consequences. If A embodies the role of the leader, the result is the old hierarchical form of leadership. Shared decision-making with different roles (leader, team) prevents schismogenesis.

The basic dynamics of positive and negative relationships, respectively, is clearly linked to the prisoner’s dilemma paradigm, particularly zero-sum games. Those are characterized by a strategical situation where «rational» «players» aim to realize the best result for themselves, which is maximum pay off (utility maximization) (Rescher, 1989b). However, they are limited in their options to behave. No direct communication is possible, not coercive power can be executed on the other, just lone reasoning, anticipating and decision making exists. By the same time the «players» are connected, dependent in the way that what one decides has an impact on the other as well, and vice versa. The massive research on this issue clearly shows that one, as a «rational» actor, has to consider the other to opt for a move which could mean massive loss (Pies et al. 2009). In this situation it’s rational to choose a «solution» which is less than optimal for both actors, but, and this is an advantage, they can avoid the risk of a big loss. The research also shows that trust can be quickly destroyed if one of the actors decides to defect (Bunker and Deutsch, 1995, p. 133). Thus, the prisoner’s dilemma paradigm leads into the midst of moral issues. One could argue that from a virtue ethics’ point of view an individual does not necessarily need to follow the “rational” strategy as suggested by economic theory, because it’s not a natural law. Rather he could decide to give trust in advance. Cooperative leadership is required to prevent prisoner’s dilemmas for the team.

A connecting pattern of cooperation and competition so far is the fact of two (at least) having a relationship of interdependence. Hence, we need to focus on the relationship’s quality, which is crucial for justifying if it shows characteristics and effects of productivity for both (cooperation) or just for one (competition).

Based on the theory presented, we posit two forms of cooperation: a weak and a strong form of cooperation. The weak form of cooperation forces a joint mutual operation and the relationship will always be asymmetric in the sense of Bateson or competitive in the sense of Deutsch. A prerequisite for the strong form of cooperation is the principally free independent individual, which has the choice to engage in mutually operations or not. One of the main prerequisites of cooperation as interdependence is independence. Cooperation is driven by the insight, that joint goal attainment makes sense to meet one’s own needs and wants; at the same time it is an admission that the other has the same legitimate intention and a fair process of considering all interests is required. In this latter case the individual chooses deliberately and is a full-fledged partner. The less formal or factual power systems force cooperation (in its weak form), the more strong forms of cooperation are possible and in need. We also see weak forms of cooperation as compliance (individuals are more or less behaving according to the rules given), strong forms as partnership (two or more actors who are «free» to make decisions) (Ulrich, 1988).

There is a conceptual connection to trust. Lewicki und Bunker (Bunker and Deutsch, 1995, p. 133 ff.) distinguish three forms of trust in professional relationships: deterrence-based trust, knowledge-based trust and identification-based trust. Deterrence-based trust implies that people do what they ought to do due to their fear of negative consequences if they don’t behave according to the rules set. Knowledge-based trust is rooted in predictability of another person’s behavior. Identification-based trust is characterized by fully internalizing the others desires and intentions: «At this level, trust exists because each party effectively understands, agrees with, emphasizes with, and endorses what the other wants, and can act fort the other. Identification-based trust permits one to act as an agent for the other, substituting for the other in interpersonal transactions» (Bunker and Deutsch, 1995, p. 143 f.).

In the following section we aim to clarify the ethical foundations for cooperation as well as the role of leadership in cooperative relationships amongst individuals.

1. Ethics of cooperation and the role of leadership

4.1. Ethics of cooperation

Cooperation as co-operation as we have defined it above is a relationship of (at least) two independent (free) humans who are operating jointly (Ulrich, 1988). Joint operation means making things (ideas, services, resources etc.) available to each other of which one can dispose of (knowledge, goods etc.). Cooperation manifests itself in different forms and versions:

Early in this great process of social organization three divergent types emerged, which still contend for supremacy in the worlds of action and of valuation: dominance, competition, and coöperation[[1]](#endnote-2). All mean a meeting of human forces. They rest respectively on power, rivalry, and sympathetic interchange. Each may contribute to human welfare. On the other hand, each may be taken so abstractly as to threaten human values. I hope to point out that the greatest of these is coöperation, and that it is largely the touchstone for the others. (Tufts, 1918, p. 4 f.).

According to Tufts dominance means inequality, cooperation “implies some sort of equality, some mutual relation” (Tufts, 1918, p. 5 f.). Tufts distinguishes two forms of competition, viz a social and an unsocial form. The best example for a social form of competition would be sports. Sports is rivalry where the participants agreed to act according to rules given (see also Caillois, 1979). Tufts sees a common purpose in sports, which is “the zest of contest” (Tufts, 1918, p. 8 f.): “The contending rivals are in reality uniting to stimulate each other. Without the coöperation there would be no competition, and the competition is so conducted as to continue the relation” (Tufts, 1918, p. 9). An unsocial form of competition is characterized by not having a common purpose: “to contests in which there is no intention to continue or repeat the match, and in which no rules control” (Tufts, 1918, p. 10). An example would be the illegal use of doping substances in sports and the competition about which loopholes in the rules on the use of doping can be still discovered. Competition in those cases is, according to Tufts, wasteful and rather destructive.

What are the ethical aspects of Tuft’s concept of cooperation? Unlike competition, where one needs the others to play one’s own games, cooperation builds on mutuality and common ends for “playing together”. Mutuality implies more than mere transactions (exchange of things), mutuality means partly or temporarily becoming a unit, although the actors remain basically isolated and independent.

The purpose in cooperation is joint. Whether originally suggested by some leader of thought or action, or whether a composite of many suggestions in the give and take of discussion or in experiences of common need, it is weighed and adopted as a common end. It is not the work or possession of leaders alone, but embodies in varying degrees the work and active interest of all. (Tufts, 1918, p. 7)

To see this form of dependency from one to another leads to acceptance and respect of respective basic freedom and independence as well as all interests as equally significant:

A cooperating group has two working principles: first, common purpose and common good; second, that men can achieve by common effort what they cannot accomplish singly. The first, reinforced by the actual interchange of ideas and services, tends to favor equality. It implies mutual respect, confidence, and good-will. The second favors a constructive and progressive attitude, which will find standards neither in nature nor in humanity's past, since it conceives man able to change conditions to a considerable extent and thus to realize new goods. These principles tend toward a type of liberty different from those just mentioned. As contrasted with the liberty of a dominant group, cooperation favors a liberty for all, a liberty of live and let live, a tolerance and welcome for variation in type, provided only this is willing to make its contribution to the common weal. Instead of imitation or passive acceptance of patterns on the part of the majority, it stimulates active construction. As contrasted with the liberty favored in competing groups, cooperation would emphasize positive control over natural forces, over health conditions, over poverty and fear. It would make each person share as fully as possible in the knowledge and strength due to combined effort, and thus liberate him from many of the limitations which have hitherto hampered him. (Tufts, 1918, p. 19–21).

The last sentence in above’s quote reminds us, by the way, of Seligman’s and Csikszentmihalyi’s central pillar of Positive Psychology: to make regular people stronger and to include the perspective of what could be, rather than what just currently is (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Thereby, it refers to a potential which is not yet fully tapped.

Mutuality, communality, reciprocity are important terms which are in the center of Tufts’ ethical concept of cooperation. Cooperation is the basis for innovation and progress within a group of people:

Similarily with justice. Cooperation's ethics of distribution is not rigidly set by the actual interest and rights of the past on the one hand, nor by hitherto available resources on the other. Neither natural rights nor present ability and present service form a complete measure. Since cooperation evokes new interests and new capacities, it is hospitable to new claims and new rights; since it makes new sources of supply available, it has in view the possibility at least of doing better for all than can an abstract insistence upon old claims. It may often avoid the deadlock of a rigid system. It is better to grow two blades of grass than to dispute who shall have the larger fraction of the one which has previously been the yield. It is better, not merely because there is more grass, but also because men's attitude becomes forward-looking and constructive, not pugnacious and rigid. (Tufts, 1918, p. 21 f.)

Power is likewise a value in a cooperating group, but it must be power not merely used for the good of all, but to some extent controlled by all and thus actually shared. Only as so controlled and so shared is power attended by the responsibility which makes it safe for its possessors. Only on this basis does power over other men permit the free choices on their part which are essential to full moral life. (Tufts, 1918, p. 22 f.).

As regards the actual efficiency of a cooperating group, it may be granted that its powers are not so rapidly mobilized. In small, homogeneous groups, the loss of time is small; in large groups the formation of public opinion and the conversion of this into action is still largely a problem rather than an achievement. New techniques have to be developed, and it may be that for certain military tasks the military technique will always be more efficient. To the cooperative group, however, this test will not be the ultimate ethical test. It will rather con- sider the possibilities of substituting for war other activities in which cooperation is superior. And if the advocate of war insists that war as such is the most glorious and desirable type of life, cooperation may perhaps fail to convert him. But it may hope to create a new order whose excellence shall be justified of her children. (Tufts, 1918, p. 23 f.)

Tufts is fully aware of the problem of the size of a system. His remark points towards a practical challenge, i.e. the systems’ size, which could be handled productively without too much corrosive effects, a challenge we will later discuss in the pragmatic’s section (see also Ulrich, 1991).

An ethics of cooperation must illuminate the question of why and how human actors decide to solve problems jointly. We want to expand our proposal of seeing cooperation on a continuum from “weak” to “strong”. A weak form of cooperation would be given when the actors are forced to act according to somebody’s intentions. A strong form of cooperation would be characterized by a deliberate act of decision making, coming to an agreement and eventually work on joint problem solving.

In the middle there is a form of cooperation, where the leader listens to the suggestions of the group/others, but decides at the end. The group has only a socalled votum consultativum (only consultancy), not a votum deliberativum (right to decide by majority or other established rules).

Even a strong form of cooperation could be in the rational interest of both actors, therefore we do not need any driving force like altruism. What we need conceptually is a sufficient overlap of the perception, that the outcome and the way of joint action is considering the interest of both. This is what usually is expressed by the term “trust”. Trust is an expression for the assumption that outcome and means of doing things jointly will be (sufficiently) beneficial to all involved actors. “Cooperative action (...) unlocks options through trust by reducing complexity for actions that would have remained unlikely and unattractive without trust, i.e. would not have found favor” (Luhmann, 1979, our translation from the German edition p. 30).

If weak and strong forms of cooperation are situated on a continuum, many “blends” of cooperative qualities in between are conceivable. There might be settings where we find weak forms of cooperation in a traditional setup of hierarchy in an organization and, by the same time, strong forms within a team. However mixed forms of cooperation will cause some problems, e.g. the need for specific boundaries which can protect the system against pressure from outside (Vanderslice, 1995).

Nicholas Recher’s “hierarchy for moral norms” is a useful model for further study of cooperation because it combines fundamental ethical aspects with a very pragmatic perspective (Kellerwessel, 2014).

Rescher starts with the basic proposition that “at the heart of morality lies *benevolence* – a due care for the interests of people-in-general” (Rescher, 1989a, p. 6). Thereby he clearly expresses his conviction that no moral relativism exists and that variability of behavior (more or less, sometimes against moral norms) does not undermine moral absolutism (see also Gabriel, 2020).

His model posits 5 levels of abstraction, from a universal and “absolute moral principle” (Rescher, 1989a, p. 48) to the “individual resolutions with respect to the specific issues arising in concrete cases” (Rescher, 1989a, p. 52).



**Fig. 1** Rescher’s Levels of moral norms (Rescher, 1989a, p. 50)

He sees a variety of ways of being moral, without questioning the higher-level norms: “Different “moralities” are simply diverse implementations of uniform moral principles” (Rescher, 1989a, p. 48).

At the top level of Rescher’s model we find the proposition for the aims of morality, when it comes to cooperation to “act with a view to safeguarding the valid interests of others” (Rescher, 1989a, p. 50). Basic principles and values (level 2) must support in a way, that “such values define the salient norms that link the abstract characterizing aims to an operating morality of specific rules” (Rescher, 1989a, p. 51). It’s important for Rescher to make clear that on the two topmost levels “there is simply no room for any “disagreement about morality”” (Rescher, 1989a, p. 51).

Level 3 contains “controlling do’s and don’ts of the moral practice of a community, providing us with general guidance in moral conduct” (Rescher, 1989a, p. 51). However, those guidances are still sometimes abstract and too much disconnected from currently prevailing circumstances. On level 4 context comes on stage and exceptions from the norm are possible under certain conditions (killing is legitimate if done in cases of self-defense). Level 5 incorporates action plans for all concrete real cases one could encounter.

Some more illustrative examples are displayed in figure 2:



**Fig. 2** Exemplary illustration of Rescher's hierarchy of norms (Rescher, 1989a, p. 53)

Since the notion of “interest” is pivotal in Rescher’s concept, we aim to discuss the question of “what is a “real” or “best” interest” briefly.

People certainly have different understandings of their respective interest. And they may vary in time and culture. “Morality is concerned with furthering (…) particular interests only insofar as they reflect the universal interest that all people have” (Rescher, 1989a, p. 17). This would be met by gaining “one’s livelihood in an way that suits one’s abilities and enables one to derive some personal satisfaction” (Rescher, 1989a, p. 17).[[2]](#endnote-3)

“What is at issue with *real* interests are those things that are *worthy* of being wanted, preferred, pursued because their attainment would be better for us – would enable us actually to improve our condition and circumstances. It is on the things we should want and prize that our best (or real) interests turn – and it is these that determine morality” (Rescher, 1989a, p. 17). Hence, to act heedfully (nowadays we may say in a reflective way) and in an awareness of mutual interests is essential for acting morally.

4.2. The role of leadership

Coming back to our definition of leadership as a function in a social system which reduces complexity and gives orientation, we can restate leadership to asking (and answering) the significant question: what shall we do? From a moral point of view we need to add: what would be good to do? And how can we do the things well? “Analysing ethical leadership involves the interpretation of values and various assumptions about how influence is exercised” (Bachmann, 2017, p. 31).

Leadership is a joint task with shared responsibilities in a social system. The sources of leadership are manifold and stem from rank (hierarchy), team (distributed, shared leadership) as well as from the individual itself (self leadership) (Zirkler et al. 2020). Leadership can be executed in the field of norms (deontic leadership) or in the field of expertise (epistemic leadership) (see Bocheński, 1974). Pure hierarchy is one extreme and special form of leadership, e. g. the epistemic leadership of a schoolteacher. but by no means the only one. However, it might be the form we are most used to, which is familiar and seems to have proofed its functionality for a long time.

An ethics of leadership has to embrace threefold responsibilities: economic, ecological and social sustainability (Knoepffler and Albrecht, 2009): “The principle of sustainability should be regarded as a fundamental ethical

principle also guiding ethical leadership behavior” (Knoepffler and Albrecht, 2009, p. 468, our translation).

Based on the work of Peter Ulrich (Ulrich, 1988, 1998, 2016, 2017) an ethics of leadership needs to discuss issues of leadership in an normative-reflexive way, covering the relationship between the leader and followers, the legitimization of leadership (what may one do, what should one do) and its limits (what one must not do). All this has to be discussed against the background of inalienable human and personal rights (Knoepffler, 2006, p. 65 ff.).

Leadership ethics as applied ethics must be placed in a superordinate framework that is "not an uncorrectable system of rules" (Knoepffler, 2006, p. 15, our translation). "This framework of a good world must then be concretized for the different ranges of the ethics. (...) Each concretion of the ethics on a special sector of options of human action must orient itself so to speak at the "rules of the game", which apply in it" (Knoepffler, 2006, p. 15 f., our translation).

While leadership in weak cooperations represents the one-sided exercise of power, it is different in strong cooperations. Here leadership is the expanded function of moderating the moral norm of care for the interests of all. It raises the questions of level 3 to 5 guidances (according to (Rescher, 1989a)) and ensures that the moral norm becomes feasible in practice. While doing so, leadership is fully aware of the fact that “feasibility” could be misused. Taking the context for implementing a norm into account does not mean that the context justifies any behavior. Feasibility rather means do to the best to meet the norm and considering that certain context factors may work as hinderances and obstacles in fully meeting the norm and acknowledging that there may be different ways to meet the norm best (equifinality).

The role of leadership can be illustrated by the Drucker’s idea of “social ecology” (Drucker, 1992). The social ecologist cares for his system and provides conditions in which the system can flourish. However, this needs to be done without maintaining one’s own comfort on the costs of others. This suggests a moral understanding in which fair relationships are significant.

A leadership ethics that wants to meet the demand for strong cooperation must express a specific moral leadership. Moral leadership related to strong cooperation takes care of creating a special environment. «The major challenge for leaders of cooperatives is to provide strong leadership for the organization while at the same time encouraging the development of leadership and responsibility throughout the organization. Leaders must provide a clear vision of cooperation at the framework for organizational functioning and yet nurture the development of an evolving organizational vision that is shared by all organizational members» (Bunker and Deutsch, 1995, p. 195).

Therefore, it aims at:

1. Establishing a purpose quest in the organization, expressing the organization’s purpose explicitly, reflecting and adjusting the organization’s purpose from time to time, keeping a joint and mutual vision vivid and attractive for all people involved
2. Transparency: providing and stimulating exchange of information, giving access to information, preventing information asymmetry as best as possible
3. Maintaining a culture of “non-coersive discourse” (Habermas, 2009); this requires psychological safe spaces and error friendliness
4. Inquiring how the interest of all can best be met within the group or system, differentiating frequent interests and single interests, since frequent interest have more urge to be met; documenting and (internally) publish the commitments made
5. Finding solutions as best as possible to solve individual issues (interests) if they are in conflict with the joint interests
6. Prophylactic conflict management, perceiving the “weak” signals at the passage from difference to conflict (Deutsch, 1985; Zirkler, 2014).
7. Frequent reflections on the principles of the game, adapting the rules if required, reflecting on the processes which lead to specific rules, adapting the rule making process, if required, inviting outside observers who can help to mitigate blind spots
8. Accepting the fact, that not every issue (conflict) can be solved to the satisfaction of all, giving solace if required, preventing people to fall into a pattern of “learned helplessness” (Peterson, 1993).

It is certainly helpful if the person who has the leadership role (however long and intensive) is virtuous, i.e. has developed a set of habits, which are are “prescription for action in accordance with a good plan of life. The actions which express moral virtue will, Aristotle tells us, avoid excess and defect” (Kenny, 2010, S. 213; Nass, 2018, S. 33 f.). Virtue ethics is particularly of meaning in strong forms of cooperation. The person represents the entire idea of the way actors agreed to jointly operate (if they cooperate strongly), “walk the talk” is supporting the idea, role models promote the idea, they signal integrity. Virtues are particularly of relevance where a person in its leadership role cannot invoke on rules and regulations, i.e. beyond compliance, where the person has to act according to the idea behind the rule, not following the rule literally. Moreover, a leadership position can be seducible. The person holding the position needs a good inner compass to not exploit the position for the sake of her singular interests. He may gain some personal profit while serving as a leader, however she must by no means take full advantage.

Beyond compliance is also the realm of organizing processes which allows a social system to come to agreements and doable solutions of how the can and how they want to be productive together.

1. Pragmatics of an ethics of leadership as facilitating cooperation (how to do «it»)

It’s one thing to claim an ethics of leadership which ought to facilitate (strong) cooperation and envision reason why this should be good and beneficial. But it’s another thing to implement such an approach in real life. According to modern thinkers in business ethics like Ulrich (Ulrich, 1988), (Homann & Suchanek, 2005) and (Lütge & Uhl, 2018) it would be naïve and quixotic to implement an ethics of leadership and cooperation against the predominant logic of “modern” organizations, particularly their calling for efficiency and effectiveness.

However, we can basically distinguish between a logic of maximization and optimization. The logic of maximization would mean to be as much as possible effective and efficient by all means (Tufts would speak of “cut-throat competition” (Tufts, 1918, passim)), whereby maximation is restricted to the well-being of the respective organisation without caring for external effects Optimization, instead, gives room to other aspects as well, e.g. ecological and social sustainability, which may be of consideration with good reasons as well (e.g. human rights). The distinction refers to the ethical discussion about what a “good” life consists in and to the question whether business is restricted to business only (are means of “productivity” according to capitalist ideas) or business is there for improving our common well-being.

Rescher’s level model is in itself a recommendation how to come from abstract norms to everyday activities. A group or any other social system does not necessarily need to do this on their own, although they may and some actually do. Instead, a lot of ethically functional practices are already available and can serve as “templates” or blueprints. Leadership should make sure that the discourse on a practical level is continuously, we are not saying all the time, keep on going. Templates are also available on a management level as “operating systems” such as Holacracy (Robertson, 2016) and as documented experience (Bauer et al. 2019). From Holacracy we derive the idea to distinguish between settings which are determined to clarify operative issues and such where it is about reflecting the (cooperative) processes on a meta level.

Those templates, blueprints and experiences need to be customized and adjusted to the respective conditions. This is possible by discourse, decision making and implementation of whatever was decided. Facilitating and maintaining a non-coersive discourse (as much as possible) will be one of the most important tasks for leadership functions if strong cooperation is desired. This will be prerequisite on a personal level, and is a specific virtue of the respective leader. Some degree of moral and personal development will certainly be required from every member of the group. It’s the leaders’ task to support and foster the process of individual maturation as a joint task.

For managing the discourse and mutual sense making processes (Weick, 2009) some methods and means have been turned out to be helpful, such as “nonviolent communication” (Rosenberg, 2015), “sociocracy” (Buck and Villines, 2017), “Warm Data Lab” (N. Bateson, n.d.), “appreciative inquiry” (Cooperrider, 2005). Schein’s concept of levels of relationships (Schein, 2018) helps to better understand the consequences of carefully listening and being interested in the other, rather than just utilize the other to meet my needs because I may have the power to do so. We must not forget that “my needs” often are representations of interests of others (the boss, the organization, the nation etc.; introjects in psychoanalytic language), for whom people feel obliged.

Another pivotal aspect of the pragmatics of an ethics of leadership refers to conflict management. Leadership in cooperative social systems has to carefully observe and “manage” differences prior to them getting real conflicts. We see the various differences in social groups as an inevitable part of social life and the basis of progress and development. However, if differences are being expressed as conflicts there is an increasing risk of acceleration and “widening the gap” which would be an amplification of potential negative aspects within a relationship. Prophylactic conflict management would be an important competence for those who function as care takers, i.e. leaders in a social system. Since differences are inevitable and productive within a range of quantity and quality, leadership should be sensitive to induct differences into a discourse, before they become “hot” (Pastoors and Ebert, 2019, p. 25 ff.).

In some cases hot conflicts cannot be prevented of evolving. The way those in leadership function manage the process of conflict resolution will be a crucial signal for all actors on how much trust, justice, equity etc. is really existent in the system (see also Deutsch, 1985, p. 72 ff.).

For conflict management, too, many tools, methods and frameworks exist, such as the “principled negotiation” (Harvard Negotiation Project) (Fisher, 1983).

The inclusive leadership model (Zirkler, M., & Herzog, J., Inclusive Leadership: Die Gestaltung von Zusammengehörigkeit als zentrale Herausforderung in der digitalen Arbeitswelt, article submitted for publication) with its continuum of uniqueness and belonging seems to be a useful framework to create a social space allowing to express individuality and addressing the need of social affiliation at the same time.

However, most of the “tools” depicted can be abused for fueling , self-interest, unfair power execution etc. if they are not utilized in a spirit of and based on an ethics of cooperation. Therefore, an agreement of all people involved is required to adhere to the principles of an ethics of cooperation while being fully aware of the risk of abusiveness (sometimes, someone, somewhere). Abusing the principles not necessarily puts them into question. Abuse could be understood as a form of “violating” the principles at their margins and limits. Crucial will be the way a social system and their leaders handles “violations”.

Insight in the benefit of cooperation is rooted in rationality plus positive emotions. The more encounter people have they perceive as positive, the more trust will be built, the more cooperation we can expect. Leadership can stimulate positive emotions in “really” engaging with the individuals involved (Schein’s level-2-relationships (Schein, 2018)). This is in accordance to Deutsch’s “crude law of social relations”: “the characteristic processes and effects elicited by a given type of social relationship also tend to elicit that type of social relationship” (Deutsch, 1985, p. 69).

For shared leadership responsibilities we need commitment and obligation, i.e. a system of clearly defining and describing roles as well as attached accountabilities. It must be clear who is taking care of what and whom. And the person adopting a role must clarify itself. Once tensions are observable about a misfit or a vagueness of roles, whoever has adopted this part of the leadership rile should pick up the “weak signals” and induct them into to social system in an appropriate way (i.e. not always and not any time). Clarity, in turn, is an ongoing process of clarification that will never be completed and will never be finished.

People are different, they have diverse competencies and capabilities, different aspirations, hopes, desires etc. It might be useful to think about the question which characteristics of individuals are more or less useful for a leadership position. An evaluation of the deep-rooted traits of a person (Knoepffler, 2009, p. 147 ff.) would address the question with whom best to engage in cooperation and who is best qualified for leadership positions. The ethical principal which applies is the request for self-clarification; leadership can and should help to improve and professionalize the associated social processes.

On the basis of his theory of cooperation and competition, cooperative groups will show some positive characteristics, which are good operationalizations and measures for the extent to which the social system is cooperative . We summarize and order those as follows:

1. More communication (quantity) will be going on and the quality of communication is better (listening, trying to understand what other’s mean). More ideas will be expressed.
2. More kindness, more support and less destructive expression will be found in the communicative exchange of ideas. Group members will be more satisfied with the group and feel better (save) in the group. They will be more attentive to each other. See the concepts and methods of “Positive Psychology” for practical usage (Seligman, 2011).
3. More feelings of (psychological) safety, more confidence, a higher rate of similarities in believes, values etc. are perceived among group members
4. More division of labor, more coordination of problem-solving tasks, more orientation to task achievement, more discipline in discussions will be shown. More productivity will be seen in such groups.
5. Differences and conflicts in such groups are seen as a joint problem, which needs joint effort to resolve it. The interests of all actors are considered as important and equally legitim, thus solutions would need to address those interests as best as possible.

If a social system wants to increase its capacity to cooperate, the issue of justice will be central to succeed. (Deutsch, 1985) raises the central question: “Under what conditions are people with conflicting interests able to work out an agreement (that is, a system of justice defining what each shall give and receive in the transaction between them) that is stable and mutually satisfying?” (Deutsch, 1985, p. 6). He broadly understands the associated values as those values “that foster effective social cooperation to promote individual well-being” (Deutsch, 1985, p. 37). More in details Deutsch proposes several principles, such as:

1. In cooperative relations in which economic productivity is a primary goal, equity rather than equality or need will be the dominant principle of distributive justice
2. In cooperative relations in which the fostering or maintenance of enjoyable social relations is the common goal, quality will be the dominant principle of distributive justice
3. In cooperative relations in which the fostering of personal development and personal welfare is the common goal, need will be the dominant principle of distributive justice (Deutsch, 1985, p. 38)

We derive from (Deutsch, 1985) a typology of social relations, admittedly an oversimplification of what’s going on in reality, but a good starting point. In the cooperative section we find a variety of productive relations in contrast to the competitive part of his overview. Interestingly hierarchy is also subsumed in the cooperative category. However, it is said, that hierarchy as a superordinate-subordinate relationship if not fully legitimized by those in the subordinate position, is often a cause of conflict and competition, “this type of relation is rarely free of strong competitive elements. It follows then that some superordinate-subordinate relations in hierarchically organized systems will have the character of power struggles, and these would be more appropriately classified as belonging to cell 16” (“regulated power struggle) (Deutsch, 1985, p. 78).

For cooperation, whether formal or informal, we find a range of ways to create productive relationships that can be alternatives to top-down relationships, such as “problem solving”, “organized cooperation”, “caring”, “protecting” and even “educational”. All those approaches would fit into an understanding of leadership of establishing, fostering and maintaining cooperation (see also Schein, 2018). They can be outlined as distributed leadership roles within a social system and strongly support cooperation as caring for the interest of all as a joint challenge.



**Fig. 3** Sixteen Types of social relations according to (Deutsch, 1985, p. 78)

1. Does cooperation pay off ?

Weak forms of cooperation (transactionally operating according to the rules and principles set, thus to comply) are in any case inevitable in today’s highly specialized and labor-divided world.

The more we rely on the creativity, power for innovation and communication skills (presenting ideas, freely speaking up, listening to others, adding ideas etc.) the more strong forms of cooperation are needed. If a social system in total wants to benefit from the innovative power of its “human resources” it needs to create the conditions where creativity, innovation, productivity etc. is more likely. Strong forms of cooperation have some social prerequisites.

The strong form of cooperation is a way of life and the conviction that ethics matter. Paradise is hard to reach, and it’s not even clear if the state of paradise should be aspired, but with cooperation you can get a little closer to a life which deserves to be called humane, as, for instance, indicated in the declaration of independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (*Declaration of Independence*, 2015).

However, we can identify some more sturdy and hands-on reasons, why cooperation pays off.

A study by (Espedal et al. 2012) shows that cooperation pays off in terms of organizational performance, i.e. invested capital. Ehnert (Ehnert, 2009) connects cooperation to sustainability: “Sustainable HRM is the pattern of planned or emerging human resource strategies and practices intended to enable organizational goal achievement while simultaneously reproducing the HR base over a long-lasting calendar time” (Ehnert, 2009, p. 74). Bachmann found positive impact of ethical leadership on motivation and climate: “It is noticeable, at least in the plant researched here, how much the absence of criteria like normative conduct, integrity, trust or fair treatment of employees, which are typically associated with ethical leadership, can contribute to a low employee motivation and a bad climate” (Bachmann, 2017, p. 142).

Though, the answer to the question of pay off depends largely on the value system in which it is raised. However, cooperation in the way outlined here will pay off in the long run not only ethically, but economically, too.

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1. Notes
1. Please don’t be irritated by the outdated spelling due to a former indication in the English language: The diaeresis signifies that the second vowel forms a separate syllable. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. See also the debate on individual merit and achievement and advantageous conditions, respectively, initiated by Michael Sandel with his latest book (Sandel, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)